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Jaime Jones
University College Dublin

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Pilgrimage and Audience on the Maharashtrian *Vārī*

Jaime Jones

They shout Victory, Victory! Crowds in singing groups move in lively procession.
The very sky resounds to the loud acclaim of god's names, like peals of thunder.
— Bahinabai¹

When I first encountered the *Vārkarīs* of Maharashtra in 2003, I experienced their devotion in much the same way that most Maharashtrians, and more specifically most residents of Pune, do. Having just arrived in the Indian city to participate in a summer Marathi language program, I was still finding my bearings when I heard that the *vārī*, the great pilgrimage, was coming. Our classes and other everyday activities were canceled, anticipating the massive influx of pilgrims into the already chaotic streets.

I was living with a family not too far from Fergusson College Road, where the two largest and most important processions would pass. Early in the evening, I met a friend down on the street, where pilgrims were already coming in large, though unorganized, numbers. Platforms sponsored by local temples and political organizations were already set up, many with *bhel* (puffed rice), bananas, milk, and water to give to the devotees. The crowd lining the street was building as pilgrims in white, some carrying saffron-colored flags, started to come in small groups, singing and playing small hand cymbals and barrel drums. Despite all the activity, there was a sense of calm or anticipation. Everyone was waiting for the *pālkhīs* (palanquins, or covered litters) of Sant Jnaneshwar and Sant Tukaram to arrive.

When they did arrive, from Alandi and Dehu, respectively, everything intensified.² Suddenly the streets were filled not with sporadic groups of people, but with a highly organized procession, comprising hundreds of individual large troupes of pilgrims (called *diṇḍīs*) who walked in front of and behind the *pālkhīs*, carriages that held silver representations of the *sants'* sandals.³ Each troupe was preceded by men carrying flags and banners, and each troupe sang devotional songs called *abhangas*, or chanted the names of god and the saints, led by a drummer positioned toward the middle of the group. The pilgrims' movements were synchronized to the beat of the drum, either through the tempo of their steps or by codified dance movements. There was barely room to stand on the tiny sidewalks that flanked the road; indeed, even witnessing the pilgrimage was made more difficult when other onlookers rushed to the *pālkhīs* to touch the sandals in blessing. For me, standing on the corner of Fergusson College Road and Bhandarkar Road, perhaps the most overwhelming aspect of the experience was the sheer force of sound—snippets of songs and drumming patterns changing rapidly as troupe after troupe passed by. It seemed as if movement itself was being sung.

¹ Bahinabai was a seventeenth-century *Vārkarī sant* (saint). Translated in Justin E. Abbott, *Bahina Bai: A Translation of Her Autobiography and Verses* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985 [1929]), 145–46.

² Both towns are about 20 kilometers from Pune. Alandi is the *samādhi* site for Sant Jnaneshwar. *Samādhi* is the Hindu concept of attaining ultimate oneness with the universe and leaving the earthly realm. Dehu is the town in which Sant Tukaram was born and achieved sainthood, and famously wrote his numerous *abhangas*, or sacred songs, in a nearby cave.

³ The sandals represented the symbolic remaking of the journey by each sant.

I later learned that over 500,000 pilgrims had come through Pune that day, and that this figure was less than half the total number that would travel southward to the temple of Vitthala in Pandharpur, a 21-day journey, over the coming weeks. The “great Maharashtrian pilgrimage,” as Victor Turner called it, happens every year, usually in June or July.⁴ Making the annual pilgrimage is the defining feature of being a *bhakta* (devotee) in the Vārkarī tradition, which is one of many regional *bhakti* (Hindu devotional) traditions throughout South Asia. At the time, I didn’t realize that two years later I would join the Vārkarīs on the road as they journeyed to Pandharpur, or that this initial encounter was the beginning of prolonged fieldwork and research into the musical life of devotees.

While song in this tradition takes many forms and has many purposes, the vārī is at its core, as it has been since the twelfth or thirteenth century. The Vārkarīs’ pilgrimage is extraordinary not only in terms of its size, geographical spread, duration, and frequency of the journey, but also in terms of the public nature of the event and its reach far beyond the tradition’s insiders. For many listeners, the repertory that is sung by the pilgrims is deeply familiar due to the central place that Vārkarī songs hold in Maharashtrian culture. Yet, as I experienced, the sonic force of the procession is transformative even for those who don’t understand the meaning of the sung texts, let alone the histories and ideals of *bhakti*. During pilgrimage, especially one as massive and spectacular as this, the world-making properties of music act upon anyone within hearing range, from the most devoted pilgrim to the American student on the street corner.

This article examines the relationship between music and the Maharashtrian vārī by focusing on the idea of audience—the hearers of pilgrimage procession and the act of hearing itself. This is part of a larger research project advocating an ethnomusicological approach that places song at the center of investigation rather than at its peripheries. An ethnomusicology of pilgrimage does not see music as an effect or an artifact of pilgrimage; rather, it contends that music makes pilgrimage possible. Elsewhere, I have examined the vārī as ritual activity, focusing on song’s capacity to coalesce person, place, and text during the journey.⁵ I am also working on a project that considers the Vārkarī pilgrimage as it is (re)produced through mass-mediated forms, a perspective that is necessary given the fact that, in Maharashtra, the songs take up so much cultural space: in addition to being sung by devotees in the streets, they are taught in schools, published as texts, recorded, Bollywoodized, and shared on social media.

In focusing on audition during pilgrimage procession, I will examine how devotional publics are created or sustained by listening practices that make the vārī a spectacular event. Rather than limiting pilgrimage to a ritual or symbolic function, I suggest that, as procession, the vārī becomes a context for audition, an open field that sustains a kind of cultural resonance that does not distinguish between devotion and diversion, between nationalist, sentimental, or pop-cultural treatments of *bhakti* and its real practices. This resonance, both tangible and audible during the monsoon season in Maharashtra, can be approached only by examining the performative nature of the act of pilgrimage itself, the repertories and styles of music that accompany the pilgrims

⁴ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974).

⁵ See Jaime Jones, “Singing the Way: Music as Pilgrimage in Maharashtra,” *Ethnomusicology Ireland* 3 (2015).

from start to finish, and the efficacy of musical sound in shaping the diverse and changing publics that witness the journey.

Frameworks for Understanding the Vārī

One underlying assumption that informs my analysis of audience in the Vārkarī pilgrimage is that devotion in South Asian religiosity is about not belief but embodiment; this distinction has profound implications for understanding music's place in the tradition. As Christian Novetzke has argued, bhakti is not just an expression of the self, but "an outward expression of the self, a performance of emotion," and, I might add, one that creates emotion in turn.⁶ Thus, embodiment is a "prerequisite for [bhakti] practice"; in other words, performing song and feeling devotion are the same thing.⁷ Novetzke also suggests that embodied performances of bhakti require audience, citing not only the trope of "reception" in Hindu thought but also the centrality of audition in the creation of "a communal identity of fellow listeners."⁸

I understand audience both as a group of real listeners and as an activity that is highly valued in Hindu practice. One of the core practices of Hinduism is *darśan*, which might be translated as "seeing and being seen," and refers to the viewing of a deity's image in a temple or shrine. Doing *darśan* works in a circular way: an individual apprehends god while god apprehends the individual. Similarly, devotional songs are about hearing and being heard, but in a certain sense the circle expands and includes not only the self and god, but also others within hearing range. During pilgrimage, audition and audience play a primary role in sustaining performing/feeling (singing!) bodies. Song becomes manifold: it is an assertion, a meditation, a movement generator, a text carrier, an invocation, an annoyance, a background, an interruption. In other words, during the vārī, song becomes a context for multiple experiences of pilgrimage, some shared and others isolated.

Another useful framework for thinking about song in pilgrimage comes from anthropological investigations of pilgrimage following Victor and Edith Turner's foundational work on the subject.⁹ Some of the Turners' conceptual models for pilgrimage have been challenged. Of particular difficulty has been the idea of antistructure. This formulation characterizes pilgrimage as a prolonged period of liminality (in-between-ness) during which participants experience a profound sense of *communitas* (intensely felt togetherness or belonging), which acts as an ideological opposition to typical social hierarchy and structure.¹⁰ While pilgrimage can be liminal and can foster *communitas*, other studies have demonstrated the high degree of variable

⁶ Christian Lee Novetzke, "Bhakti and Its Public," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11/3 (2007): 256.

⁷ Novetzke, "Bhakti and Its Public," 261. See also Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Sant Namdev in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁸ Novetzke, "Bhakti and Its Public," 256.

⁹ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*; Victor Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage* (New Delhi: Concept Press, 1979); Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

¹⁰ In fact, in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, Victor Turner uses the vārī as a primary example of a modern ritual in which "spontaneous *communitas*" is still possible. It should be noted that he based this observation not on his own fieldwork but on a 1960 dissertation by Guy Deleury.

interpretations produced by pilgrimage, particularly those of long duration.¹¹ Yet the Turners' emphasis on the *experience* of pilgrimage (rather than on its artifacts or ideologies) still provides a grounding frame for anthropological and ethnomusicological investigation.

Over the past 20 years or so, an influential formulation has appeared, one that characterizes pilgrimage as a convergence of person, place, and text, enacted and experienced in time.¹² This intuitive and simple triad is powerful insofar as it affords quite complex accounts of pilgrimage experience. This is not to say that pilgrimage is about *a* person (a Vārkarī) moving to *a* place (Pandharpur) and reading *a* text (an abhanga); rather, boundaries between such seemingly discreet entities are always blurred, changing, and overlapping. This is an especially appealing lens through which to view music's manifold presence in pilgrimage, one that has been lacking in most scholarly work on devotional traditions of South Asia. Such scholarship often conceptualizes songs as literary texts to be translated and treated to hermeneutic analysis.¹³ In this formulation, the emphasis instead is on musicking people who interact with texts and transform places through sound.

Another important set of concerns for this analysis comprises South Asian conceptualizations of audition, conceptualizations that have been around for a long time. These terms provide a small sample of modes of understanding sound and hearing extant in Hindu philosophical writings dating back to at least the first millennium. The first three modes describe specific conceptions of sound itself, each one emphasizing sonic sacrality and sonic efficacy:

<i>Nāda</i>	The voiced absolute (ever-present, causal, primordial sound)
<i>Vāk</i>	Effective speech (power of the spoken word)
<i>Sruti</i>	That which is heard (refers to foundational Hindu texts, bestowing upon them divine origins)

The second group describes qualities of apprehension or understanding—in other words, listening:

<i>Pratibhā</i>	Intuitive flash within the mind (revelation)
<i>Samādhi</i>	Deep absorption and/or return to the absolute (nonbeing)
<i>Rasa</i>	Emotional essence (and its aesthetic apprehension)

¹¹ John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2013 [1991]); Simon Coleman, "Do You Believe in Pilgrimage?: Communitas, Contestation and Beyond," *Anthropological Theory* 2 (2002): 355–68; Massimo Leone, "Transcendence and Transgression in Religious Processions," *Signs and Society* 2/2 (Fall 2014): 314–49.

¹² Eade and Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred*; Simon Coleman and John Elsner, *Pilgrimage: Past and Present: Sacred Travel and Sacred Space in the World Religions* (London: British Museum Press, 1995); Coleman, "Do You Believe in Pilgrimage?"

¹³ To be fair, there is good reason for this—in the regional languages of South Asia, bhakti songs often comprise the earliest vernacular literary tradition.

These concepts suggest, first, that sound is divine in origin, and in fact constitutes the absolute (the sacred universe). Second, sound has efficacy and acts upon the world in observable ways. Furthermore, hearing is a way to tune in to the absolute, and various levels of apprehension exist, depending on one's attentiveness and openness to insight. Perhaps most important, these ideas emphasize simultaneity and embodied knowledge as the driving features of sonic power. In his discussion of form in early Indian music, Lewis Rowell speaks of musical attentiveness as "circumaudition," which he characterizes as "a process of gradual discovery."¹⁴ It is up to the performer to communicate the affective and devotional content of music, and up to the listener to perceive its truth. The performances that materialize religious feeling in contemporary India are multiple, layered, and at times overwhelming, as they build upon cultural and personal affective connections that resonate with, impact, and rise up out of musical materials and practices.

In what follows, I examine some of ways that the audition of pilgrimage makes worlds in contemporary Maharashtra, and these worlds both sustain pre-existing communities and stimulate new ones. While audition takes many forms during the *vārī*, particularly for the pilgrims themselves, I focus on audition during the spectacular event of pilgrimage, when both performance and audience are most visible. One of the distinguishing features of the *Vārkarīs'* pilgrimage is revealed in the word *vārī* itself, which literally translates as "the 'regular' appearance of a person at a certain place at a certain time."¹⁵ The concept of return is of central importance, for a *Vārkarī* does not merely make the pilgrimage once or a few times in his/her lifetime, as is the norm for other important Hindu pilgrimages in South Asia.¹⁶ For devotees, the pilgrimage is made at least twice yearly, but for most, "the *vārī*" refers to the most public and popular manifestation of it, which takes place annually on the "bright eleventh" (*ekadashi*) of Ashadh, the Hindu month that typically falls in June/July. It is at this time that "the *vārī*" becomes an event that multiple publics coalesce around, one that, for some, has much in common with other festivals popular in Maharashtra.¹⁷

The concept of return, the annual nature of the pilgrimage, is part of what allows the *vārī* to occupy space next to other, more mainstream Hindu festivals. For the diverse mix of onlookers on the side of the road, audition takes multiple forms, only some of which are attentive, as I will explore below. However, I also want to consider the perspective of the pilgrims themselves during the more spectacular components of pilgrimage. While much of the time spent on the long road to Pandharpur is characterized by a focus inward (with sound acting to stimulate that focus),¹⁸ the journey is punctuated not only by the appearance of large crowds in more populated areas, but also by rituals that emphasize a kind of self-spectatorship. In this sense the *vārī*, like

¹⁴ Lewis Rowell, *Music and Musical Thought in Early India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 228.

¹⁵ John Stanley, "The Great Maharashtra Pilgrimage: Pandharpur and Alandi," in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 83.

¹⁶ Other pilgrimages, such as those to sacred temples along the Ganges in northern India, are known as *yatra*, the generic Sanskrit term. See Philip C. Engblom's introduction to D. B. Mokashi, *Palkhi: An Indian Pilgrimage*, trans. Philip C. Engblom (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 23; and Stanley, "The Great Maharashtra Pilgrimage," 83.

¹⁷ Dussehra and Ganesh Chaturthi are two other major festivals that have major processional elements.

¹⁸ See Jones, "Singing the Way."

other bhakti practices, combines inner-facing contemplation with outward-facing performance, providing an extended period of time during which the Vārkarī community sees and hears itself.

“The Vārī” and Its Audience

I found a new definition of Maharashtra: the land whose people go to Pandharpur for pilgrimage.
— Irawati Karve¹⁹

The repeated performance of the vārī from year to year constitutes a historicized and reflexive mode of participation, for both those walking and those witnessing. For the pilgrims themselves, this history is substantiated by the sights and sounds of the countryside through which they pass, resonating with the words of the abhangas being sung, and through their own personal memories of traveling the same roads before.²⁰ For the audience of pilgrimage lining the streets of cities, towns, and villages, it is the presence of singing Vārkarī bodies that provides the substantiation of history which makes the event meaningful. While memory plays a role, it is memory based on the repeated yearly spectacle. So while devotees often think of the multiple journeys they’ve undertaken, public consumption of pilgrimage sees the journey as a single, though repeated, event. The audience of the vārī is massive, and includes not only those who witness the pilgrimage firsthand but also those who follow its movements through television and newspaper accounts of the journey. While observers do not encounter the experience of pilgrimage directly, many become caught up in the vārī through a kind of cultural resonance that relies upon a shared imagination of Marathi cultural history and geography. These ideas are manifest in the sound of pilgrimage, regardless of the audience’s relationship to bhakti or a Vārkarī worldview.

The ways in which audiences form through hearing the vārī are contingent on both the logistics of pilgrimage and the position of the Vārkarī tradition within personal, regional, and national imaginaries. There are specific features of the vārī that make it stand out, not only from other pilgrimages within Hindu and global religious practices, but also as a particularly significant occasion in Maharashtra. From a Vārkarī perspective, the purpose of the journey is to reach Pandharpur, the dwelling place of Vithoba (also called Vitthala, Pandurang, Hari)—in other words, to meet god. Pandharpur’s significance is detailed in a song by Sant Namdev (ca. 13th–14th century):

There is no end or limit to the bliss of Pandharpur;
even Sesa [snake god] with his thousand mouths cannot describe it fully.

Only he is worthy to taste the happiness of Pandharpur,
who, in life after life, has performed the regular pilgrimage to it.

While going to Pandharpur, divine love overflows,
and joyous singing of Vitthala’s name is heard.

¹⁹ Irawati Karve, “On the Road: A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 22 (1962): 22.

²⁰ The Vārkarī abhanga canon comprises a huge body of the tens of thousands of poems written by the saints from roughly the late thirteenth century until the early nineteenth century. Many of these songs focus on the theme of the vārī, using specific place names to reference the journey itself.

On seeing Vithoba who has the Universe as His form and who pervades the whole Universe, one forgets one's sorrow and body-consciousness.

Namdev Maharaj says 'I will become the dust of his feet; thereby Pandurang will never forget and abandon me.'²¹

Today, nearly a million pilgrims undertake the journey to Pandharpur each year, to meet Vithoba, to see him but also to be seen and heard by him. For devotees of all bhakti traditions, which exist in different forms throughout South Asia, the unifying feature is the search for moments when "divine love overflows," when the union of god and self is fully realized. Song, dance, and other forms of musical performance are substantial contexts for this union, both during the pilgrimage and throughout the year. During the *vārī*, the weeks of walking toward Vithoba's home, singing his name, combined with arriving in Pandharpur and finally seeing his image, comprise a particularly resonant context for embodying bhakti. For a *Vārkarī*—literally, "one who does the *vārī*"—this is both a sacred obligation and a culmination of experience that is reinforced throughout the year.

Vārkarīs do not travel alone, they bring their saints with them, and in a certain sense this allows even the audience of pilgrimage to meet god. The two largest processions (*pāḷkhīs*) carry the *pādukās* (sandals) of two of the most important saints of the tradition, Sant Jnaneshwar and Sant Tukaram. However, at least 43 different saints, represented through effigies of their shoes, are carried from shrines throughout Maharashtra. In this way, all of the tradition's sants (usually translated as "saints")²² remake the pilgrimage each year, as they did during their own lifetimes.

The emphasis on the sants is another feature of *Vārkarī* practice that has ties with other bhakti traditions, which all emphasize personal transcendence through devotion and divine love. This message is transmitted primarily through the words of the sants, transmitted orally through sung forms, most especially the *abhangā*. The historical, human authorship of these songs comprises a significant element of the form itself, usually in the final couplet, which names the writer. In musical practice, these lines are often repeated, acting as an invocation of the sants, who have semidivine status. Hearing the *abhangas* allows for the sants' presence to be felt throughout Maharashtra. This is achieved not only through the text, but also through musical setting. The sants were always performers of their own songs, and the *abhangas* rely upon a set of modes and meters that are understood to be local and original.²³ When the publics of pilgrimage hear these *abhangas*, in full or in fragments as troupes pass by, their authenticity is realized through their texts but equally through the musical setting performed by real(ly) devoted bodies.

²¹ Namdev 432: "Pandharichya Sukha Ant Paar Naahi Lekha," trans. N. N. Subramanian, 2010.

²² The root meaning of *sant* is "air, breeze, or current"; vernacular usage of the term has overlapped with the English "saint," however, the root suggests the continued presence of the sants in the air that surrounds devotees.

²³ While this is a claim made by both *Vārkarīs* and scholars (see G.H. Ranade, *Music in Maharashtra* [New Delhi: Chief Information Officer, Maharashtra Information Centre, 1967]), it is not provable in the sense that no written record of the *rāgas* utilized by the earliest sants exists. However, the discourse of authenticity that surrounds *abhangā* performance for the *Vārkarīs* cannot be underestimated, as it figures centrally in the construction of status and legitimacy as the devotees themselves understand it.

Over the past 50 years, public participation in the *vārī* has dramatically increased, reflecting a phenomenon that can be measured on the world's stage as well as within the Indian subcontinent, as we bear witness both to an increased participation in religious life across the globe and to the rise of various forms of Hinduism as a renewed and renegotiated marker of identity in India. One way of accounting for the various ways that pilgrimage can be heard is by considering who is listening and what their motivations are. While I have already examined some of the ideological motivations underpinning *Vārkarī* participation, even this group is far less unified than it would seem. Throughout the subcontinent, *bhakti* has historically appealed to those disenfranchised by “classical” Hindu social structures, and the *Vārkarī* community has come primarily from lower-caste and former untouchable communities, in particular the cultivator castes of rural Maharashtra, and the descendants of these cultivators in Maharashtra's cities. People who identify as *Vārkarīs*, people who regularly sing the names of gods and the saints and who make the pilgrimage at least twice a year, still tend to come primarily from this social group. For many, the tradition is passed down within the family, and there are strong ties between ancestral homes, lineages, caste, and devotion. For most, being a *Vārkarī* is connected to worldly life, and from its beginning the saints of the tradition have not only allowed for but also highlighted the fact that *bhakti* makes possible the coexistence of ecstatic, divine love and the mundane concerns and ties of work and family. Yet there are also renunciates among the participants. Mahinema *Vārkarīs* give up their worldly life in order to make the journey continuously, and while this extreme level of asceticism is the exception rather than the rule, for them “the *vārī*”—the one that takes place on Ashadh Ekadashi—transforms an activity which is carried out continuously and alone into one that can emphasize communal forms of identity and turn activity into event.

Although the procession to Pandharpur is a defining characteristic of the *Vārkarī* tradition, not all those who perform this task are considered or even consider themselves to be *Vārkarīs*. Today, professors and students from Pune University, tourists, Maharashtrians who do not typically participate in *Vārkarī* activities, ethnomusicologists, and government officials also make the journey. It is common to find non-*Vārkarī* families in which the responsibility of making the pilgrimage is passed down from generation to generation, the burden often falling on older women in the family. Often the experience of the *vārī* for these pilgrims is very different from the *Vārkarīs*'. There is a “foreigners' *diṇḍī*,” for example, that makes special arrangements for transport and accommodation, traveling on motorcycles and sleeping in guest houses or hotels. These distinctions are recognized by the organizers of the *vārī*, who determine different categories for devotees based upon how often the journey to Pandharpur is made.²⁴ They are also recognized by other pilgrims, *Vārkarī* and non-*Vārkarī* alike. D. B. Mokashi, in a classic autobiographical account of his 1961 experience of the *vārī*, relates an overheard conversation that addresses the different kinds of pilgrims who go to Pandharpur each year:

²⁴ Stanley and Morinis, “The Great Maharashtrian Pilgrimage,” 84.

But then somebody else says loudly, ‘We complain because we have to sleep in our wet clothes. There are Warkaris right now at the town’s entrance who are sleeping out in the rain. They’re the real Warkaris. We’re just “Trip”-karis!’²⁵

Today this same play on words is still used to indicate more participants from outside the tradition. The percentage of “trip-karīs” who undertake the journey continues to rise, and of course even more people participate in the vārī as listening spectators, as a willing audience who incorporate the vārī into other social imaginaries.

The Influence of Hindu Nationalism

Before moving on to a closer examination of audience, it is necessary to consider the place of the Vārkarīs in one discursive thread in particular, something that might be called a “bhakti imaginary.” This imaginary is deeply embedded in the nation and in nationalist projects, and has roots in the independence movement of the early twentieth century. The task for Indian nationalists involved uniting a diverse population against the British, and developing a pan-Indian “Hinduism” that at the time was at odds with the wide variety of existing Hindu practices. In particular, the various bhakti traditions, which stimulated devotional sentiment through embodiment, direct language, and music, were seen as especially effective methods for inspiring devotion to the nation. The emotional efficacy of bhakti practice needed to be channeled into a relatively uniform, mainstream Hinduism with a recognizable style. As a result, bhakti’s methods were maintained, but its heterodox particularities, the local and diverse ways of achieving devotion (so often manifested in vernacular, regional song genres), were sidelined.

A large percentage of the audience for the vārī consists of individuals who imagine themselves to be part of India through a Hinduism that is constructed nationally and reinforced through mass-mediated devotional forms, one that is conducive to modern and global understandings of religion. For trip-karīs and for the wide audience of pilgrimage in Maharashtra, the Vārkarīs’ presence is connected not with modernity, but with a shared past. In this sense, and for this public, the vārī is a social drama, a performance that reiterates a particular history. The outpouring of simultaneously affectionate and condescending love for the Vārkarīs is predicated upon a worldview in which they are inherently anachronistic, powerful in their ability to channel emotion, yet often relegated to the realm of the symbolic.

The reception of the vārī is in fact subject to a number of competing discursive imaginaries, political, social, and economic, drawing upon different features afforded by the Vārkarī pilgrimage. This is particularly striking in Maharashtra, which has long been the political center of the Hindu right wing. The headquarters of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (usually abbreviated RSS), a “social organization” intended to foster traditional Hindu values and promote a Hindu India, is located in Nagpur, Maharashtra’s third-largest city. While not a political party, the RSS has had close ties with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that currently controls the national government. One of Maharashtra’s more powerful right-wing political parties is the Shiv Sena, based in Mumbai. Hindutva (a Hindu-centric ideology) generates both

²⁵ Mokashi, *Palkhi*, 77.

actions and beliefs that exclude others, particularly Muslims, and that uphold the caste system, marginalizing India's Dalit²⁶ population. Considering the inclusionary ethics of the Vārkarī tradition, centered on the idea that everyone has access to god and evidenced by the centrality of Dalit and low-caste sants such as Chokhamela and Tukaram, it would seem that Hindutva and bhakti could not overlap. Yet it is often the case that the political imaginary of the right wing incorporates the vārī, rewriting the long protestant tradition of the sect. Once again, the Vārkarīs become more symbolic than real, and the pilgrimage can be framed as an enactment of Hindutva, rather than bhakti, values.

The substantial increase in levels of participation in the vārī, for both pilgrims and audience alike, has exploded its significance beyond its tradition. It is important to note that many Vārkarīs are aware of the multiple ways in which their community and practices are construed. This awareness is perhaps most intense during the vārī, when pilgrims can't help but be aware of the various publics that bear witness to the journey. It is also the case that some Vārkarīs have ties with right-wing politics. Yet it is still true that, for the most part, those who perform the vārī on a yearly basis do so to maintain familial or cultural tradition, to access an increased level of godliness, or simply to fulfill the obligations to god and the sants that come with being Vārkarī.

To return to some of my initial considerations, devotionism values embodiment over belief, placing feeling/singing listeners at the center. When the pālkhīs pass through cities and towns on the road to Pandharpur, when the most devout practitioners join individuals who imagine the Vārkarīs within other discursive frameworks, in a certain sense the “meaning” of pilgrimage does not matter. What matters is its performance, the idea *that* it is heard trumping *what* is heard. This is part of what makes pilgrimage much more than the repetition of a social drama that affirms the past and tries to shore up the present. While “the essential heterogeneity of the pilgrimage process” allows for multiple and competing discourses to coexist, its fundamentally performative nature suggests that these discourses cannot fully manage experience.²⁷

Hearing Pilgrimage from the Roadside

Says Tuka: O God, my Mother, put me in any place provided the feet of the Sants touch me.
— Tukaram²⁸

Pune, with a population of five million, is the second-largest city in Maharashtra, after Mumbai. The urban heart of the Marathi-speaking region, it sprawls across the confluence of the Mula and Mutha Rivers of central Maharashtra, on the edge of the Deccan plateau. As one walks through the twisting streets and multiple bridges today, the city's difficult histories reveal themselves not only in the terrain, but also in the temples, forts, homes, roads, and neighborhoods that simultaneously stand for and literally form Pune. Its geography is marked irrevocably by its rivers, which divide the city into three districts: “Deccan” to the west, a historically wealthy Brahmin neighborhood; “Old Pune” in the center, where the oldest *peths*, or “localities,” house

²⁶ Literally, “oppressed”; formerly known as “untouchables”; those occupying the lowest place in the caste hierarchy.

²⁷ Eade and Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred*, 2–3.

²⁸ Translated by G. A. Deleury in *The Cult of Vithoba* (Pune, India: Deccan College Press, 1960), 76.

families who have lived there for centuries; and “Camp” to the east, which served as the summer capital for the British in Maharashtra and still contains army barracks and bungalows that mark a colonial past. On the outskirts, new, almost invented neighborhoods like Kalyani Nagar are home to the still-growing IT industry that has transformed Pune’s economy.

Even to begin to get to know the city, one must walk slowly and learn to recognize and uncover the layers of personalities, powers, religious traditions, and political maneuverings that created and are still recreating it. For Pune-kars, or citizens of Pune, these layers, while always potentially present, come in and out of focus, whether consciously or subconsciously. During the *vārī*, a more unified sensibility of urban citizenship emerges, consolidating around devotional affectivities stimulated by the audio-visual spectacle of procession.

When the *pālkhīs* of Sant Jnaneshwar and Sant Tukaram pass through Pune, they do so at the very beginning of the journey, just after they merge on the roads from Alandi and Dehu. These are the two largest processions, largely due to the status and popularity of the two saints whose sandals are borne in the palanquins from which the processions derive their names. The city is transformed ritually and symbolically by the arrival of the saints; it is transformed, too, by the arrival of over 500,000 pilgrims who bear them and shout their names. The audience is as diverse as the pilgrims themselves: local political officials, Shiv Sena activists, college and university students, foreigners (Pune is the home of the Iyengar yoga institute and the Osho ashram, as well as the site of several study abroad programs, and consequently has a relatively large foreign population), and upper middle-class, English-speaking residents line the streets. The audience in Pune participates by seeing and hearing the pilgrimage as a spectacle, year after year. In order to examine this audience more fully, I return to the side of the same road upon which I began this article.

In 2005, two years after my initial glimpse of the *pālkhī*, after learning and studying *pakhawāj* (the barrel-shaped drum that accompanies devotional singing) with a community of *Vārkarīs* based in Pune, I made my way through Pune across Shaniwarwada, the Peshwa fort in the heart of the old city, toward the Deccan Gymkhana on the western bank of the Mutha River. As I approached the fort on foot, I began to hear the rhythmic clatter of the *tāl*, small bronze hand cymbals worn around the necks of the pilgrims, played consistently as an accompaniment to both the pace of the procession and the *abhangas*, the words of which were starting to become audible. At Shaniwarwada itself, several troupes of pilgrims took a break from the procession, singing as they rested in the shelter of the fort’s walls. These *diṇḍīs* comprised the vast number of “unofficial” pilgrims on the journey, who walked ahead of the “official” *diṇḍīs* of Jnaneshwar and Tukaram. After speaking with a few of them, I continued to make my way across the river, until I joined the vast crowd that lined either side of Fergusson College Road, the heart of the city’s historically Brahmin district. Inside a tiny Vitthala temple on the bustling street, *Vārkarīs* were finishing a *bhajan* (ritualized performance of *abhangas*). These songs, amplified and distorted by a cheap microphone, joined the recordings of popular devotional songs sounding through loudspeakers in the street stalls, both meeting the noise and singing of the pilgrims on the street.

Finally, heralded by the arrival of the Jaripatkadhari, the horseback rider carrying a golden pennant, the official *diṇḍīs* accompanying the sants' *pāḷkhīs* began to arrive. These *diṇḍīs* were larger (comprising a couple of hundred people each) and well organized: a line of men carrying orange flags and a banner containing the *diṇḍī* number walked in front, followed by rows of men all in white, singing and dancing to the accompaniment of the *tāl* which most of them carried, and to the *pakhawāj*. The drummer walked in the last row of men, next to the *vīna*-bearer, a symbolic figure carrying the drone instrument associated with Tukaram. The women of the *diṇḍī*, dressed in brightly colored saris, followed the men, some carrying holy *tulsī* plants on their heads. The women also sang and danced, a few even carried and played the *tāl*.

Each *diṇḍī* sang its own *abhangas* in its own order. The sound of the event was huge and in motion: from the perspective of a spectator standing in one place, the tunes and the texts continually changed as each group moved by. Some of the *diṇḍīs*, simply chanting "Jnanoba Tukaram,"²⁹ were ecstatic, the men jumping and running forward. Others were more solemn, singing full versions of *abhangas* filled with complex metaphors and imagery. Some were performing to the crowd, something that I perceived as "hamming it up" in the most joyful way possible. When the first palanquin arrived, the crowd surrounding me, and I with it, rushed into the street to touch the sandals of the sant, and the musical noise was replaced by the shouts and fervor of the crowd, some of whom would also take up the cry of "Jnanoba Tukaram" as they ran.

Spectacle and Identity

The idea of "spectacle" is of course immediately or at least originally visual, related to the concept of display, of something seen. Certainly, the sheer size of the *pāḷkhī* processions, the orange flags, ordered rows of people walking and dancing in unison, the white *kurtas*³⁰ and caps of the men, and the *tulsī* plants and brightly colored saris of the women who walk behind them are all deeply visual manifestations of devotion and movement. Veit Erlmann has argued that the colonial spectacle was a primary means of imagining both the world and otherness, a way of making sense out of one's surroundings, a way "in which the world is grasped as though it were an exhibition."³¹ In other words, for Western (colonial) culture, the spectacle functioned as a system of mediation. The sounds of pilgrimage clearly intensify the spectacular event of the *vārī*, reinforcing a pageantry of devotion that can be made to fit into a variety of worldviews and ideologies. However, they also create a context in which circumaudition, the gradual discovery, the flash of insight simultaneous to hearing (*pratibhā*), is possible. Standing on the side of Fergusson College Road, one's attention shifts between amplified recordings of devotional songs, the live performance of different *abhangas* and the chanting of the sants' names as each *diṇḍī* passes, the constant ringing of the *tāl*, and the banging of the *pakhawāj*. Through attentive

²⁹ Jnanoba is another name for Jnaneshwar.

³⁰ Kurtas are the long tunics worn by men in South Asia.

³¹ Veit Erlmann, *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination: South Africa and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 97.

audition, these various sonic threads make a narrative from fragments, a narrative that emphasizes places, names, history, and authenticity.

The *vārī* is often treated by its non-Vārkarī audience as a signifier of regional identity. I recall being asked, by the aunt of a friend, how my stay in India was going, how I was adjusting to life in Pune. After I briefly described my research and experiences so far, she said to me, “You’ve seen the *vārī*, so you know Maharashtra.” A close friend of mine, part of the city’s upwardly mobile, intellectual and cultural English-speaking elite, remembered hearing abhangas during her childhood, when her parents used to house and feed a few of the Vārkarīs during the pilgrimage. For her, the yearly arrival of the pilgrims in Pune gave her a sense of “home” despite the vast discrepancy between Vārkarī tradition and her quite worldly and cosmopolitan experience.

For those experiencing the *vārī* as spectators, the extreme sonic and visual forces of the procession evoke nostalgia and identification through aesthetic excess. This excess works, or acts, by the citation of culturally resonant indices and icons that are both seen and heard. The audience of the *vārī*, those who do not participate in the journey, are able to imagine a unified regional identity through the experience of seeing and hearing the *pāḷkhī* processions. This identity is at least partially organized around bhakti, Hindu, and national imaginaries. Their experience, as opposed to that of the Vārkarīs, might be understood as mediated and phantasmagoric to the extent that they are often far removed from the actual circumstances and practices of bhakti. Yet I am unwilling to fully dismiss this experience; phantasmagoria induces an affective state through the layering of symbols and images; as such it intervenes directly with the social imaginaries of its audience. The sounds of the *pakhawāj* and *tāl*, as well as the melodic and rhythmic form of the abhangas, signify not only the Vārkarī tradition but also an identity and experience that slip between aesthetic, embodied, cultural, and political ways of being Maharashtrian. In this sense, it is not *the public* that forms around the *vārī*, but rather Vārkarī, Punekar, Maharashtrian, Hindu, and Indian *publics*.

The Vārkarī procession down Fergusson College Road lasts hours. The crowd shifts as time goes on. Some stay for the whole thing, some leave after the palanquins pass. Still others join the pilgrimage as it travels into the *peths* of Old Pune. As day turns into night, the *pāḷkhīs*’ procession is often held up, and Vārkarīs sing and dance in place to sustain the feeling of movement. While the journey itself is stalled, motion and feeling intensify. Volume levels go up, and those standing at the side of the road can focus on one *diṇḍī* at a time. Often, at these moments, members of the audience step into the road, dancing and shouting the names of god and the sants alongside the pilgrims. Upon leaving the roadside, the audio-visual spectacle of procession ceases to be observable, although of course it is still a context. Instead, the audience can touch the feet of the sants, not by rushing up to the palanquin, but by sharing the dust of the road with them. The *vārī* affords this sharing; in a sense, it is only spectacle when its audience makes it so. The circularity of hearing and being heard—by the self, by god, and by others—is infinitely expandable when listeners also become performers.

Performing a Vārkarī Public

The marketplace of Pandhari, the marketplace of joy! There pilgrims meet in ecstasy. So many flags they cannot be counted!
— Chokhamela³²

The Vārkarīs' journey can be described as a culmination. It acts as a culmination of a yearly cycle, taking place during the monsoon season each year. It acts as a culmination of the daily acts of devotion that devotees take part in outside the context of pilgrimage, since musical performance in many forms, in particular singing and drumming, constitutes a significant amount of daily devotional practice. It is also a culmination of community; it is the only time during the year when the Vārkarīs are visible to themselves as well as others.

In this final section, I examine ritual elements of the vārī that help individuals imagine an intimate Vārkarī public of "known and knowable persons," drawing upon a framework developed in Byron Dueck's work on aboriginal music in Manitoba.³³ In reformulating the idea of intimacy and focusing it away from concepts of amity, care, or love, Dueck emphasizes the intimate publics that develop in real-time musical encounters. Over the course of the year, Vārkarīs experience intimacy as love and closeness through individual relationships with god and through membership of smaller networks of fellow bhaktas who worship, sing, and drum together. During the vārī, these kinds of intimacy are maintained, but there are also performance elements that are oriented toward revealing a Vārkarī audience.

To go on the vārī means to embark on a long and difficult journey on foot, to take several weeks away from one's job and family, to sleep on the ground and consume minimal nourishment, and to commit one's ears and eyes to the sound of the abhangas. In the summer of 2005, I traveled with the Jnaneshwar pālkhī with one of the official, registered diṇḍīs, made up mostly of students of my pakhawāj guru in Pune. I was a trip-karī, to be sure, but I was surrounded by Vārkarīs who made the journey every year, and their willingness to include me allowed me to experience the vārī as a pilgrim (of sorts). Most of the time is spent walking and singing inside the diṇḍīs; the spectacle made by the procession as a whole is not accessible to the pilgrims. There is of course some awareness of audience while walking, particularly as the vārī passes through some of the bigger cities or towns. Yet most of the Vārkarīs I spoke with suggested that the daily journey, as sung, was the moment at which devotion was most felt. This was articulated to me by several people, notably by one of the women walking with our group, Shindubai, an illiterate low-caste vegetable seller, who told me that walking and singing was her *kām*, her "work."

One of the drummers told me that the songs on the vārī weren't musically very interesting, because they were simply sung "for ourselves." This feeling is augmented by the physical space of the road. Walking straight ahead, one experiences only one's immediate group, which often includes only the few rows ahead and behind, and not even the whole of the diṇḍī. One hears the

³² Abhanga 28 by Chokhamela, the fourteenth-century Vārkarī saint. Translation in Eleanor Zelliot, "Chokhamela: Piety and Protest," in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action* ed. David Lorenzen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 213.

³³ Byron Dueck, *Musical Intimacies and Indigenous Imaginaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

pakhawāj loudly only if situated nearby, so voices and the ringing of the tāl are the most audible aspects of performance for many pilgrims. However, this internally oriented mode of performance only partially comprises the experience of pilgrims, which is punctuated by several different musical rituals that either interrupt or signal the end of each day's journey. These rituals include the *ārati*, the *ringaṇ*, *kīrtans* (musical sermons), and performances of *bhāruḍ*, or devotional theater. While the latter two of these are most commonly witnessed by pilgrims from an audience perspective, with professionally trained performers framed by makeshift stages, *āratis* and *ringaṇs* are both ceremonies in which the entire *pāḷkhī* participates and, most important, is visible and audible as a whole.

The Āratī

The daily *ārati* ceremony can be characterized as a display intended for the internal community, the pilgrims themselves. The word *ārati* refers generally to a Hindu offering to god characterized by the lighting of *diya* (lamps) and by songs that emphasize the name(s) of god. This is usually carried out as part of daily *puja* (prayer), and happens both in homes and in temples. During the *vārī*, this often-private practice takes on massive scale. *Āratīs* take place daily, usually in early evening, after the *pāḷkhīs* have completed the day's journey, and are held in fields designated for this purpose. Led by the *Chopdar* (ceremonial officer wielding a silver staff) and by *Vārkarī kīrtankars* (spiritual leaders and sermon-givers) situated at the center of the field, the *āratis* are attended by all of the official *diṇḍīs*, who comprise an audience of thousands. The ritual combines both devotional and practical elements, and thus acts both to mark arrival through prayer and to address logistical and organizational concerns of participants.

At the Jnaneshwar *ārati* ceremony in Natepute, for example, the *diṇḍīs* entered a huge dusty field, encircling the far reaches of the perimeter to form a massive circle. They continued to play drums and *tāl* and to sing while they waited for the entrance of the palanquin. Everything and everyone was oriented toward the center of the circle. Visually speaking, the layout might merely suggest the importance of viewing the palanquin of the sant, and being in a good position to watch the offering that would follow its arrival. The hugeness of the space and the size of the crowd meant that for many, literal *darśan* was not possible; but this orientation, with the *diṇḍīs* spread out in an orderly fashion in a circle, was not only about seeing but about being seen.

And it was certainly about being heard! The sound level intensified as the *pāḷkhī* was brought in; those seated began clapping and chanting “Mauli, Mauli” (literally, “mother,” one of the names of Jnaneshwar), a conch was blown, and the *diṇḍīs* continued to play drums and *tāl*. The call of “Ho” from the *Chopdar* at the center signaled an end to the sound. On this occasion, however, one group kept playing to signal a complaint. The leaders moved across the space to address the group's problem, since the *ārati* cannot continue until complaints are addressed. Once that was done, they returned to the center and commenced with announcements—lost and found items and people, instructions and itinerary for the next day. This was followed by the offering proper, consistently of roughly ten minutes of sung prayer led by the *Chopdar*.

The layout of the event, the use of music and sound both en masse and within each *diṇḍī*, and the combination of practical and ritual activities all suggest that the *ārati* is oriented toward the

audience of Vārkarīs. Music is used to intensify the arrival of the sant's palanquin, to offer prayers to Vithoba and Jnaneshwar, to signal dissent, and to allow the Vārkarī community to be heard as a whole. As described earlier, for most of the day as the pilgrims walk, individuals see and hear only the few rows of people in front of them. Meals are taken within the individual *diṇḍīs*, and nightly camps, while often abutting other *diṇḍīs*, are likewise distinct. While it is impossible to *know* all of the hundreds of thousands of other pilgrims on the *pāḷkhī*, the *āratī* makes the Vārkarī audience *knowable*, and in this sense the *āratī* contributes substantially to the creation of a Vārkarī public.

The Ringan

The *ringan* (circle of Vārkarīs) is the other ritual space in which the entire procession sees and hears itself. There are a total of seven *ringans* during the *vārī*, and their frequency increases as the Vārkarīs near Pandharpur. Typically taking place between the day's starting and ending points, *ringans* are considered to be moments of respite over the course of the journey. They combine intense, virtuosic displays of musical and physical prowess with a more relaxed, carnival-like atmosphere.

In 2005, I was a part of the *ringan* at Sadashivnagar, between Natepute and Malshiras. This is the first *gol*, or circular *ringan*, that leads up to arrival in Pandharpur, and it happens in the afternoon. As we approached the huge field still in *diṇḍī* formation, excitement built and our pace picked up. My friend Nilima started pulling me off to one side, away from the center of our troupe. Suddenly everyone was running, streaming into the field to create another vast circle. Unlike the *āratī*, however, this circle was moving, first quickly and then at a more measured pace. Our *pakhawāj* player got up on the shoulders of another man and started playing as loudly as he could, and the shouted chanting of “Mauli, Mauli” from within my own group overlapped, out of sync, with the cries of other *diṇḍīs*. Looking around from where I was running alongside my group, I could see *pakhawāj* players held up on multiple shoulders, and realized that each one represented one *diṇḍī*. The acrobatics got more intense: drummers were hoisted up in multitiered structures built out of people. Slowly, a path began to clear around the outer edge of the space. Vārkarī leaders took up the center, surrounded by the *diṇḍīs*, still chanting “Mauli.” Some pilgrims (particularly women and the elderly) sat on the other side of the path. The horses and rider raced in, galloping around the circle three times before being led away by the Chopdar.

These events are quite public and are attended by the local community (after the *ringan*, food stalls and vendors appear, and there is time for socializing before the trek continues). In addition, they are widely covered in local and state newspapers. I remember a few of my *diṇḍī* members wondering if we would get our picture in the paper because of my presence. There seems to be a heightened sense of being watched during the *ringan*, which coincides with a self-conscious mode of performance, yet in contrast to the procession through Pune, for example, in this context the Vārkarīs perform almost exclusively for other Vārkarīs! In the musical and physical acrobatics enacted during *ringans*, a kind of masculine competitiveness also comes into play. In addition to the “entrance,” and following the ritualized arrival of the horseback rider, the *diṇḍīs* “relax” and play *phugaḍī*, a danced game accompanied by drum and *tāl* in which two people

grasp hands and spin, as well as other circular games for an hour or two afterwards. At this point, individual members of the *diṇḍī*s show off their skill and give their physical beings over to the games. Each group displays prowess through feats that highlight the physical exertion involved in playing the drum and dancing. The *ringaṇ* is in many ways a “show.”

Performance during the *āratī* and *ringaṇ* ceremonies is simultaneously outward- and inward-facing. This is evidenced in both cases by spatio-physical orientations, by the locations and sonic manifestations of each individual *diṇḍī* within the context of the whole procession, and by ritual that is formally delineated and collective. There is also a heightened awareness of audience during these occasions that is discrete from the more internal experience of singing on the road, and also from the re-enactment of tradition that can render *Vārkarīs* mere culture-bearers for the audience that lines the streets of Maharashtra’s villages, towns, and cities.

There is a critical distinction between the spectacular elements of, on the one hand, the *vārī* perceived and “viewed” as a procession, and, on the other hand, the ritualized spectacles that mark time, place, and arrival for the *Vārkarīs* as they travel. The *pālkhī* procession in its linear, traveling formation can only be spectacular to onlookers. The intensely layered aural and visual experience of the roadside audience is, of course, only available if you are standing and listening in one place. As a pilgrim moving with a *diṇḍī*, you only hear and see the music and dance of your own group in this context. During the *āratīs* and *ringaṇs*, *Vārkarīs* become the audience for the spectacle of themselves. The excess effected by the *din*, the mass of people, the multiple and multiplied performances of the *diṇḍīs*, and the ritual form allows devotees not just to imagine, but to experience a *Vārkarī* public, as well as their own place in it.

There are moments in which the *Vārkarīs* are not only aware of the fact that they are being heard, but become their own audience. Those who line the streets to watch and hear the *pālkhī* processions move through a city or town do not only stand still, but call out, join in dancing, and participate in the *darśan* of the saints. One of the more radical prospects afforded by music during the *vārī* is the fact it provides a context that resists the mere repetition of unchanging ideologies and symbols. Music activates *pilgrimage*, even when “pilgrimage” is treated as spectacular event or subject to social mediations. This is largely because the audience of pilgrimage procession is constantly in flux. Audition itself is challenged and informed by the aesthetic excess of the *vārī*, and interrupted by a variety of social imaginaries that attempt to control it. Singing/feeling bodies move through multiple positions. Listeners become participants, and pilgrims sing to, for, and about themselves.

